

EVERY EXQUISITE THING

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*For the girls who were
born hungry.*

Property of Electric Monkey

“Behind every exquisite thing that existed,
there was something tragic”

– Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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PROLOGUE

A full moon hung low over the mirrored surface of the lake, round and silver as a ten pence piece.

A darkened figure knelt on the shore, screaming like a wounded animal.

Blinking sleep from my eyes, I squinted through the arched window in my dorm room. With a sickening lurch, I recognised the spidery limbs and the short black hair.

Davina.

I don't know what made me run to her. We hated each other with a venom I'd never experienced before – our every exchange left puncture wounds – and yet there was something so existentially terrible in her cries. Something that called to me like a siren.

Stuffing my feet into sheepskin boots, I tossed a trench coat over my pyjamas and hurtled out of the flat. The night air was so cold it felt solid, and the Great Lawn was slicked with dew as I sprinted down towards the lake. A low mist gathered in the Crosswoods beyond, swirling with moonlight to cast a spectral glow over the grounds. Everything smelled of frost and silt.

As I grew closer, Davina's howls ebbed to a low sob, and somehow that was worse.

Breathless, I skidded to a halt beside her. Her head was in her hands, narrow shoulders shaking violently inside her leather jacket. Her knees pressed into the wet lakeshore, and damp was spreading up her black jeans – she must have been freezing.

'Davina,' I said, torn between softness and ferocity, the words coming out somewhere in between.

She stilled at the sound of my voice. 'Leave me alone, Penny.'

'No.' I pulled my coat tighter around me, teeth chattering. 'You're upset.'

Her hands clasped her face with a kind of fierce desperation, as though trying to hold her features in place. 'Just fuck off.'

'No.'

Usually she would fight back, spar for spar, dodging and parrying with vicious words, but her ferocious spirit seemed to abandon her. Instead she began hyperventilating, rollicking gasps wracking her whole body as she tried to take in air.

Then she said something else, but it was so obscured by her laboured wheezes that I didn't catch it.

'What?' I asked. I'd been crouching beside her, but had to give in to my trembling muscles and lower my knees to the ground. The cold wet earth turned my silk pyjamas into ice in an instant.

Slowly, silently, Davina lowered her hands from her face, turning to look at me.

My stomach heaved, and I fought the urge to cry out.

Her left eye was *gone*.

But there was no blood. The socket was simply welded shut, bisected by a ragged gash from the arch of her brow to the ridge of her cheekbone. Even in the silvery moonlight, it was clear the scar was a faded purple, as though the wound was weeks or even months old.

Impossible. I'd seen her only hours before.

Planting a palm on the ground, I stared at the earth and fought to keep from fainting. My vision blurred, shimmering like mist and silk and shadows.

'Oh my god,' I whispered, bile stinging the back of my tongue.

I looked up at her again, dizzy and disoriented, the feeling of landing into a parallel world where everything was *wrong*.

Davina was shaking uncontrollably now. 'It's real, then. Not a nightmare.'

Pull it together, I told myself. *This isn't about you.*

Except it was.

'I'm so sorry,' I all but moaned. Blood thundered in my ears. 'I'm so sorry.'

She covered her face once more, and my heart broke for her. She started murmuring lowly, urgently, like a litany. 'Not my eye. Please, not my eye, I – it can't be gone. No, no, *no*. I'll do anything.'

My skin prickled with vicarious dread. 'Does it hurt?'

A frantic sob. 'I felt the blade, I – it doesn't make sense. There was no real knife to my face. How can – *arghhhhhhhh*.' She

drove her fingers through her cropped black hair, grabbing desperate fistfuls of it.

‘Were you awake?’

She shook her head fiercely. ‘The pain woke me up pretty quickly.’

‘And you came here?’ My stomach was gripped in a vice, threatening to empty at any moment.

‘I don’t know why I was compelled to.’ She dropped her bone-white hands into her lap and stared out to the eerily still water. The swans barely caused a ripple as they circled hypnotically. ‘It was like my feet dragged me of their own accord. I didn’t even scream, at first. I thought it was a dream.’ Her whispering voice rose an octave. ‘It *has* to be a dream, Penny. It has to.’ I’d never heard her sound so young.

A strange kind of protectiveness came over me. I grabbed her by the shoulders, looking at her straight on, not flinching at the sight of the wound even though I so badly wanted to. ‘We’re going to find who did this.’

But her trembling only intensified. She once again began praying to a faceless deity. ‘No, no, no, *please*, please don’t be real, please –’

‘Davina . . .’

Then she let go, let the pain and anguish and fear roll out of her in visceral screams. She dug her fingers into the earth, dragging deep claw marks along the shore. ‘No, no, no, no . . .’

The ghostly swans on the lake watched with funereal ambivalence.

Fear gripped me by the ribs as I ran a finger over my own warning scar – carved as I slept by an invisible blade, a disembodied hand.

There were already three dead bodies in the Masked Painter's wake.

The message was clear: if we didn't find the killer soon, we would both be next.

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CHAPTER ONE

Several weeks earlier

The spotlights shone white-gold from the back of the theatre, making the row of casting directors in front of them look headless.

I clutched a blank sheet of paper in my hands. A fake letter from Macbeth.

“What thou art promised. / Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great, / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly, / That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false / And yet wouldst wrongly win.”

My voice was a staccato rattle, fraught but also restrained, heated but controlled, like stoking a coal furnace. I imbued the Lady’s scornful lines with an undercurrent of jealousy, hunger, letting her need for power burn through the words. Ambition was not too difficult an emotion to access, given how much I wanted this lead.

And I knew in my bones I was going to get it.

I'd spent my whole life playing the part of Penny Paxton, daughter of an icon. Acting felt as natural to me as breathing. So if the old adage was true – that it took ten thousand hours to master a craft – then nobody could come close to me.

But god, I was nervous. I was so nervous that my vision blackened and starred, and I had to blink furiously to bring myself back into the room. Fear coiled around my stomach like a python crushing its prey, and I couldn't fight the feeling that I wanted to be somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

It was the first week of a three-year undergraduate programme at Dorian Drama Academy. The auditions for the winter production of *Macbeth* were open, and my fellow first years sat along the front few rows, watching, enraptured, something like envy written on their faces. Everyone here was excellent – you had to be, to get into Dorian – but they could feel the palpable tension in the room. A crackle in the air, mingled with the scent of hairspray and dusty velvet chairs.

I just had to hope it was for my talent, not my name.

When I finished the audition piece, murmurs rippled through the small crowd. The stern-faced casting director puffed air through her lips. Fraser Li, the favourite for *Macbeth*, climbed to his feet and clapped rapturously. I fizzed with pride. None of the other auditions had garnered such a response – it was very much the *modus operandi* to pretend not to be impressed by your rivals.

I left stage right, and a blonde girl with bright red glasses

was wringing her hands in the wings. She was up next, and looked exactly how I felt inside: small, terrified. Detached from her peers. Alone in some fundamental way.

'You were amazing,' she whispered, clicking her knuckles. Heavy red curtains fell around us in stiff waves. 'How do I follow that? Shit. I should have chosen a different soliloquy.'

Her self-consciousness yanked me back to my first-ever audition. I was ten years old, vying for the role of Mary in the primary school nativity play. By then I had started to understand my mother's fame in a more real sense – the stares, the gasps, the way people literally fainted in her presence. I also understood the fact that she did not shower me with love the way the other parents in the playground did. My young brain had drawn a wobbly line between the two realities, concluding that if I could follow in her footsteps, maybe I would finally earn her love.

Unfortunately, I could barely get the words out during the audition, and pure terror caused quite a serious accident in my daisy-print underwear. Rebecca Murray was cast instead. Mum didn't even blink at the news. I'd thrown the pants in the tampon bin at school, so she wouldn't have to see what I'd done.

I never wanted anyone to feel how I'd felt back then – even if they were my competition.

'You're here for a reason, okay? You've got this.' I reached out and squeezed the nervous girl's shoulder, even though physical affection didn't come naturally to me.

She was white as a sheet. 'The words have totally left my

brain. I'm going to forget my lines, and everyone's going to think I'm a moron. What if Dorian's my flop era? Oh god. Youth theatre was one thing, but this . . . maybe I'm not cut out for . . .'

Sympathy twisted through me as she trailed off. Dorian was no am-dram. The stakes were so much higher, the audiences so much more discerning, the pressure of being perceived so much more debilitating.

'Do you want me to wait in the wings?' I suggested quietly. 'I'll mouth the words along with you. If you get stuck, just cast a dramatic look over at me, okay? Pretend it's a character choice to have her stare off into the middle distance every now and then.'

She blinked several times. 'You'd do that?'

'Of course.' Perhaps it was foolish, but I couldn't fight the feeling that we were both just insecure little kids. And I had spent so long wishing that someone would do the same for me. A reassuring hand on the shoulder. Kindness and affection without ulterior motive.

'Thank you, Penny.'

She smiled gratefully, but I felt that familiar burst of heat, the intense prickling sensation that came from strangers knowing your name when you did not know theirs. A fundamental power imbalance. A scale tipped too far in one direction. The generational curse most would consider a gift.

Play the part. Pretend to be your mother. Nobody needs to know the real you.

'You're welcome,' I said, painting the sanguine mask onto my face the same way I'd been doing for eighteen years. Smearing the persona over myself like red lipstick. 'What's your name?'

Something shone in her eyes, as though she was dazzled by my mere presence. 'Nairne.'

I nodded. 'I'll be right here.'

As it happened, Nairne only needed one cue, and while her performance was good, it was too timid, too apologetic. We both exited the stage and took our seats in the front row. Even in the unforgiving leather of my Louboutins, I felt like I was walking on air.

The part was mine. It had to be. Because there was only one actor left to audition for Lady Macbeth, and she was horribly late.

Hadiya Lazar, the casting director, rose to her feet. A high-necked purple poncho draped over her arms in folds of expensive cashmere. 'Well, if Ms Burns does not deign to join us, perhaps we should wrap things up here.'

Professor Drever, the show's director, gritted his teeth. 'Let's give her five more minutes.'

Lazar scoffed. 'If she does not respect our time, we do not respect -'

'Five. Minutes.' Drever's jaw was clenched, and he stared rigidly down at his notes.

Shooting him a filthy look, Lazar cast her gaze around the rest of the students. 'By all means, you're free to go.'

But nobody moved. We all wanted to see how this would play out. Would the final actor show up – and receive the tongue-lashing of the century? Or had she disappeared off the face of the earth, the pressure of Dorian already too much to handle?

I looked reverently around. This theatre was what most people thought of when they heard the words Dorian Drama Academy. Fronted by a facade of towering stone columns, the neoclassical auditorium inside was all grand proscenium arches, gold-leaf boxes and tiers, and an ornate ceiling fresco depicting the wedding night from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was one of the few student theatres in the world that regularly attracted flocks of patrons, all eager to watch the budding talent of the future – and earn the bragging rights of *I saw them before they were famous*.

While we were waiting in tense silence for the final actor, my phone vibrated with a call in my pocket. *Mum* flashed on the screen, and with it came a pulse of conflicting emotion. I slipped up the aisle into the atrium of the theatre to answer.

‘Hi, Mum.’

‘Darling, listen, can you send me the names of your new flatmates? I’m going to have Ballantyne look into them. We must make sure they’re not moles.’

I took a deep, steadying breath. Ballantyne was the private investigator my paranoid mother kept on retainer. She wouldn’t let anyone new into my life without a thorough background

check, though it was not completely clear what she was afraid of leaking. Hers was more of a vague, directionless paranoia – a fine mist rather than a sharp point.

‘Okay.’ A taut beat. I waited for her to ask, but of course she didn’t. ‘I just had my audition.’

‘Oh, of course, darling!’ The words were fond, but the tone was not. A common affectation of the upper class – the ability to sound emotive while remaining utterly detached. ‘How did it go?’

‘Really well. Really, really well.’ I couldn’t stop the beam spreading across my face. ‘I think I nailed it, Mum.’

‘How wonderful! I’m so proud of you, darling.’

I stilled, those words I’d chased for so long casually tossed in my direction, but there was no warmth behind them. A simple stock phrase, proffered in the correct social situation.

‘You are? Proud of me, I mean.’ Maybe I could jostle loose some genuine emotion by forcing her to elaborate.

‘Of course,’ Mum said. ‘You know, I was cast as Lady Macbeth in first year myself.’

‘Really?’ The revelation was at once moving and anxiety-inducing – yet another benchmark for direct comparison.

A curious pause. ‘It’s a wonderful achievement, Penny.’

I swallowed hard. ‘Thanks. You know, I wasn’t sure whether you remem–’

‘Listen, darling, I’ve got to dash. But congratulations! I can’t wait to come and watch.’ The thought of my ultra-famous mother stalking back into these hallowed halls filled me with a

dread I didn't quite understand. 'Send me those names, won't you? Soon as you can.'

As we hung up, I tried to convince myself that the words I'd chased for so long were worth the effort. Worth crapping my pants in primary school, worth the debilitating stage fright, worth mimicking her every move since I was a child. And yet I felt more hollow than ever, as though the figure on the horizon I'd been chasing for a decade was nothing but a shadow.

Maybe it would've felt better to receive them over text, I reasoned. Then I wouldn't have to examine the porous words for tone and tenor. I could read them in my own voice. Stare at the screen until they sank in. *I'm so proud of you, darling.*

Just as I was preparing to go back into the auditorium, the rotating gold doors leading from the quad into the lobby swivelled and squeaked, spitting out one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen.

She was ghost-pale, with black pixie hair that stuck up in tufts. Her make-up was Parisian-bare, with just a slick of rose-pink lipstick and soft black mascara. Thinner than me, I noted – a score the demon in my mind always kept – and dressed entirely in black, but it was more biker chic than gothic. Leather jacket, tight jeans, cropped tank top exposing a strip of toned white stomach.

Attraction fluttered low in my belly, like the wings of a moth around a candle.

Seconds later, understanding clicked into place. She was the last student to audition for Lady Macbeth.

My rival.

And yet she was not rushing at all.

She drew closer, carrying with her the scent of fresh cigarette smoke and musky perfume. I couldn't tear my eyes away; it was as though she had her own magnetic field.

I was no stranger to raw charisma – my mother bled the stuff – but it was rare in people my age. I'd always believed it was something you grew into, something that became more powerful with time, like the dark matter of the universe expanding.

I waited for the girl to notice me, but she never did. The experience was entirely foreign. I was used to stares, to whispers, to feeling like a rare species in a city zoo, but the girl in the leather jacket didn't even look at me as she strolled calmly past, her footsteps unhurried, as though she wasn't dangerously late to an audition that would define the next three years of her performing career.

I followed her back into the theatre, hypnotised, and slid into the second row back from the stage. The late girl was having a terse, low-toned conversation with the casting panel, and *everyone* had turned to watch.

'That's Davina Burns,' muttered Nairne beside me. 'I heard her entry audition brought grown men to tears.'

After a few moments of chastising from the director – which seemed to roll off Davina like rain off an umbrella – she walked down the aisle towards the stage with the elegance of a ballerina, her feet barely grazing the red carpet. Climbing up the narrow

stage steps, she shrugged her leather jacket off and tossed it into the wings.

And then she began.

The transformation into Lady Macbeth was immediate – and silent.

Her whole body snapped with tension. Her face was at once blank and haunted.

She cupped her empty hands together, as though clasping the bottom of a candle. I felt immediately silly for bringing a blank sheet of paper to use as a prop. A ridiculous amateur. A pantomime of a person.

Then she started to walk fearfully around the stage.

The sleepwalking scene right before Lady Macbeth's death.

Ghosts we could not see slipped over her face like swathes of silk. Her footsteps grew increasingly frantic.

The theatre was crypt-quiet, the air taut with tension.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

I waited for Davina to speak, but she never did. My mind filled in the lines – *Out, damned spot! Out, I say!* – but it was almost like she didn't *need* to utter them. The emotions of the scene writhed through her entire body. Fear and shame and frantic remorse.

She pulled one hand off the invisible candle, staring blankly into her palm. Her breath hitched in her chest, horror dawning over her pixie features.

Here's the scent of blood still: all the / perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little / hand.

Goosebumps covered me from head to toe. The scene played out not in words, but in *her*. I had never seen anything like it.

The silence in the auditorium swelled; metastasised. All the hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention.

Davina's ears palpably pricked up, as though suddenly hearing a knocking at the gate.

What's done cannot be undone.

And then the scene was over. She broke character immediately, jarringly, and it was disorienting, the way she slipped from one person back into herself, as though the character had been her true persona all along.

Nobody clapped. She did not bow.

Instead she aimed a sarcastic little thumbs up towards the casting panel, scooped up her leather jacket and stalked out of the auditorium as soundlessly as she'd arrived.

A few moments after the door to the lobby closed, the spell was shattered. Murmurs rose like a tide, and the air dropped several degrees. The casting panel stared at the spot on the stage where Davina had stood, as though seeing her ghost, her after-image.

And I knew in my heart that I had just lost the lead.